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Young Visitors in the City: Their perceptions of heritage buildings

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Abstract

This paper examines the perception of the young visitors to the city on heritage buildings. The city chosen for the study was Johor Bahru. In the earlier urban study of the city, the majority of the youth were found around the modern shopping complexes rather than the heritage area. The methods of collecting data include field observation, questionnaire and literature review. The findings show that the youth interest in the area related to activities offered in the area rather than the setting. The resulting information from this study can be used as guidance in developing a heritage area.

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1. Introduction

The retention of heritage buildings in the city center is one of the aspects often considered in the developments of towns. There are many reasons why the buildings need to be retained. The buildings may stay preserved if the authority figures that the heritage building can contribute regarding the economy of the place. Other reason could be due to the value of the heritage buildings either to the owner, to the place or the society. In some localities, the heritage buildings could be found in the old sections of the towns. These buildings are often segregated from the new developments. This segregation means that the new recent developments, such as shopping complexes are

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located away from the heritage area. This situation may ensure that the heritage buildings be left alone. However, it also means that the focus of the town may be shifted to the area with the new developments.

The situation as mentioned above relates to what happens to Johor Bahru City Center. The city grew from a little coastal village into a cosmopolitan city. The earlier buildings are situated around the area where the river meets the sea. The town developed further inland over the years. The heritage buildings that still survive over the years are municipal buildings, law court, temple, Indian mosque, railway station, shophouses and others. The old shophouses formed the most number of heritage buildings in the heritage zone. Sultan Ibrahim Building was the tallest structure in the past. Currently, it is overshadowed by high-rise buildings in the city centre.

New developments within the city had reduced some the old buildings into rubbles. These new structures include three new shopping complexes. Currently, the most number of visitors seem to flock the three complexes, especially the City Square. Contrary to this situation is the quietness of the heritage zone of the city center. This situation posed the question whether the general public particularly the youth aware of the existence of the heritage area and the buildings.

According to Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010), Johor Bahru City Center is populated by the age groups ranging from 1-year-olds to over 75 years old. But the highest numbers of the population are youths who are aged ranging from 19 to 25 years old (21% of the total population). With this much number of population in a city by age group, it is understandable that they would make a great impact on the development of the city.

The youth was also chosen as the main subject because there were not many of them around the heritage areas. On the contrary, many of them were found in the modern shopping complexes. Do they know the existence of the heritage buildings within the city? Do they know the difference between heritage and non-heritage buildings? Do they appreciate the heritage buildings? These questions were some of those asked to the youths in the research. The objectives were to find out youth perception and their attitude towards heritage buildings. The other objective was to see the related reasons for their opinion concerning heritage buildings. The knowledge of these aspects is important since the present youths will be the future inheritors or controllers of the heritage buildings in the city.

2. Literature review

2.1. Study area

The chosen area for this study is the heritage area along the Segget River in Johor Bahru City Centre. Though the river is covered with hardscape, the historical value of it is high. The area's early settlements started from the year 1855, known as Tanjung Puteri populated with Malays in a small fishing village and Chinese led by a master, Tan Hioh Nee on the Gambier and black pepper plantation. It was believed that the city is popular, and the dominant economical contributors were the Arab merchants. Tanjung Puteri later renamed as Johor Bahru (1866), was developed over the years with shop houses, palace, state mosques, railway station and residence being built by the next administrator Temenggong Abu Bakar (Kassim, 2011).

Currently, the heritage buildings can be found either within the older section of Johor Bahru City Center or sandwiched in between new buildings. These buildings have turned into essential pieces of Johor Bahru's urban fabric and are historical heritage points of the city. The primary building is Sultan Ibrahim Building. The building used to be the tallest in town and Malaya when it was completed in 1942. It suited to its function as the administrative building of the Johor state government. The strength of the building lies in its architectural value, with traces of classical, Johor Malay and Islamic architecture. The other dominant heritage buildings are the old railway station, the High Court and the royal museum. These buildings were built in colonial style. The heritage religious buildings in the city centre include the Indian mosque, Chinese temple, Indian temple, Sikh temple and a church. The old shop houses were the primary buildings in the older section of the city. This building type lines the streets in rows in a grid pattern. The buildings are connected at street level by the verandah-way.

2.2. Young people in the city

There are several theories on youths. Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1972) notes that there are four stages of youth developments. Young people are considered as the last part of life before one entered adulthood. At this age group, an individual develops abstract thought. He also develops logical thinking and the ability to make judgements from available information. Abstraction is considered as a way of solving speech problems and in making attempts or drawing solutions (Santrock, 2008; Suthasupa, 2011). This theory was elaborated earlier by Huitt & Hummel (2003). The youth can demonstrate through the logical use of symbols related to abstract concepts. Literature reveals that young people have a significant ability to generate abstract propositions. They could also produce multiple hypotheses and outcomes based on logical systems. However, their thinking tends to rely more on abstraction, rather than reality. Suthasupa (2011) also elaborates on their ability to mental images. The mental pictures of a place differ according to age, gender, lifestyle and socio-cultural background. However, according to Suthasupa, young people are considered better at abstract thinking compared to the other age groups.

Abidin et al. (2011) elaborate that the latest trend, trendsetters and advertisements can influence youth easily. This situation is because they are very frail in making judgement and evaluations. Thus, they tend to be more attracted to new things. King (2005) suggests that the young people can be easily influenced. The reason was due to their desire to become socially accepted. Thus, they were easily attracted to new things and trend.

The other aspect concerns the youth is on shopping and their choice of merchandise. Martin (2009) mentions that the youth has the most buying power when compared to the other age groups. They tend to spend mainly on typical and conventional items such as clothing. Therefore, the youth contributes to the retail industry. In the study done by Omar and Ali (2009), it was found that they preferred the mode, lifestyle and trend that are associative to the products display. In other words, they considered window display that was able to convey the meaning of the product to be more attractive than others. Omar and Ali (2009) notes that the youth or young consumers to be brand conscious. They tend to be more responsive to latest style in making their choices.

3. Methodology

In collecting data, several tools were used. As the title of this study suggests, to study on youth perceptions of the heritage buildings in the city of Johor Bahru should start with field observations because can derive the human density pattern from there. The information needed was the type of users and their places of interest. The study area for visual study was the heritage zone that the Segget area and the area around Trus street. The area consisted of both heritage buildings and modern shopping complex. The observations were done over a period of 2 weeks, according to a particular time of the day throughout the weekdays and the weekends. The time set for this observational study was from 7.00am to 11.00am, 12.00pm to 6.00pm and 7.00pm to 12.00am with 1-hour interval break in each session. The observations were conducted with ten observers positioned at various places, where human activities were found.

The study of the field observation and the unstructured interview was done simultaneously. Some young visitors met in the heritage zone were interviewed at random. The motive was to get a direct feedback regarding their perceptions of the heritage buildings. It was also intended to test whether the result of the field observations was correct regarding their interest and intention of choosing the places to visit. The inquiries also include their attitude on the preservation of the heritage buildings.

A questionnaire survey was done by distributing the forms among 100 youth in Johor Bahru. This effort helps the study in providing the fundamental understanding of how youth from different parts of the city perceives heritage buildings. The questionnaire forms were distributed simultaneously to all the respondents. Each person was given less than an hour to complete the survey. The forms collected, and the answers given were sorted accordingly. Literature reviews from various sources were also done to enrich the study. The information gathered was believed to boost the strength and to lessen the weakness of the study. All the information and data collected, from the various tools were then analysed. Finally, the conclusions were drawn.

4. Findings and discussions

Through the urban studies done by the architecture students from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and literature review (Iskandar Regional Development Authority, 2013) it was found that the primary building type in the heritage zone of Johor Bahru city centre was the old shop houses. The uses of the buildings were commercial (184 units, 80.70%) and offices (35 units, 15.35%). Some of the shop houses are left abandoned while some were renovated to cater for the demands of contemporary customers. Some of the shop houses were demolished to make way for new development. The use of the shop houses was more on the commercial like groceries store, restaurants, clothing accessories, etc. There were also public buildings (9 units, 3.95%) which consist of temples (single unit), mosque and theatre (composite of few shop houses), museums (shop houses) and historical monument (single unit).

From the daytime observations during weekdays, it was found that the studied area wakes up as early as 7.30am in the morning where people start coming in through the main ingress, Ungku Puan Street. The majority (75%) of the people were mostly working adults and the elderly. The people consisted of visitors to the temples and shoppers in search of food and groceries. The other (25%) people in the area were the shop owners. There were more visitors, shoppers and a few tourists in the studied area after 8.30am. The youth was only seen in the heritage zone after 11.00am onwards, during the weekdays and on the weekends. The majority (84% out of 300) of the urban goers were observed to head the modern shopping complex. A small minority of them (10.3%) went to the old shophouses mainly to search for meals or to shop while the rest went to the nearby theatre to watch Indian movie or elsewhere.

Table 1. The intention of the youth in the city.

INTENTION	NO. OF USERS	%
Shopping	67	44.7
Official matters	48	32.0
Eating	22	14.6
Window shopping	13	8.7
Total	150	100

From the interview and the investigation on the youth, it was found that their intention in the city (Table 1) at daytime was to shop (44.7%), to deal with official matters (32.0%), to eat (14.6%) or to window shop (8.7%). Whereas on night time observation during weekdays and weekends, the heritage area being concentrated by the youths joining the night market. Very few of the youths came to the area for the purpose of going to the temples but then later entering the night market as well. Out of 200 people observed, their intentions (Figure 1) was to window shop (44%), buy clothing accessories (26.5%), buy snacks (17.5%), buy phone accessories (8.5%) and souvenirs (3.5%).

The findings show that the visitors to the city, particularly the youth, were more attracted to modern commercial shopping complex than the heritage shop houses during the daytime because the shopping complex caters their needs and interest more, sort of like all in one choice of place. Very few of them find the heritage shop houses attractive, and most of them were there to enjoy their favourite food or movie shows. This finding clearly shows that the heritage old shop houses offered less exciting activities for the youths to spend their time. According to the keeper of the museums in a shop house along Tan Hiok Nee Street, youth rarely visited the place. The only likely young visitors were students from the nearby institution. The small number of visitors among the youth suggests a lack of interest among the young people to visit such places. At night time, it was observed that many young people visited the heritage zone. However, the attraction was not the heritage buildings. Their primary intention was either to buy merchandise or window shopping at the night market. Thus, their interest in the area was related to activities offered in the area rather than the setting.

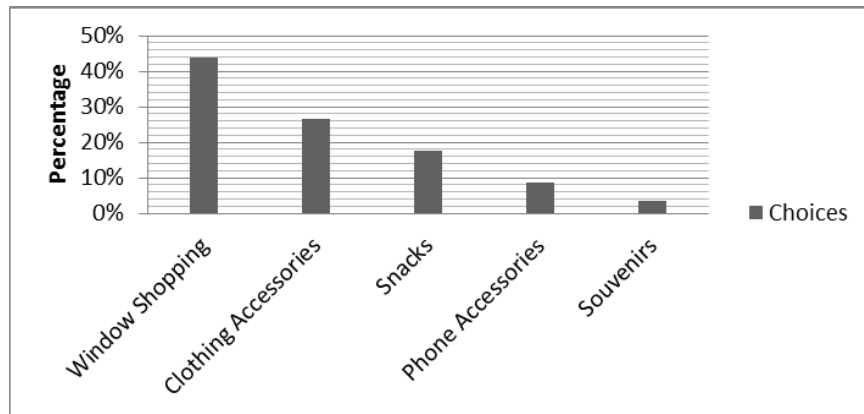


Fig.1. Youth interest in the study area

4.1. The understanding of the youth on heritage buildings

The youth involved in the questionnaire survey were tested on their knowledge and understanding of heritage buildings. Out of 100 respondents, the majority (74.4%) of them could identify one heritage building. The most commonly recognized name of buildings they considered as heritage was Kota A' Famosa in Malacca (35.9%) and Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad, Kuala Lumpur (9%). Apart from that, 12.8% of the respondents guessed wrong building names and the other 12.8% could not identify any heritage building. The poorly chosen buildings considered as heritage includes KLCC, a building built recently. Many of them failed to recognize well-known heritage buildings, such as Muzium Negara, Kuala Lumpur. Even though all of them lived in Johor Bahru, 79.5% of them could not recognise the Sultan Ibrahim Building, an iconic building in Johor Bahru city centre.

Apart from that, the respondents were also requested to address why they considered a given structure as heritage. About one-third of the respondents (34.6%) cited their choice of building as heritage because it is old and valuable while 33.3% of respondents cited the buildings as unique (Figure 2). The other reasons include attractive facade (24.4%), a well-known building (12.8%) and has historical value (5.1%). Jokilehto J. (2006) stated that the World Heritage List of buildings are defined by the outstanding universal value (OUV), which means that those buildings must have historical, artistic and scientific values to achieve an outstanding universal value. It is evident that most of the youth were lacking in exposure to these terms, or some may not even understand or misinterpreted the real meaning of heritage.

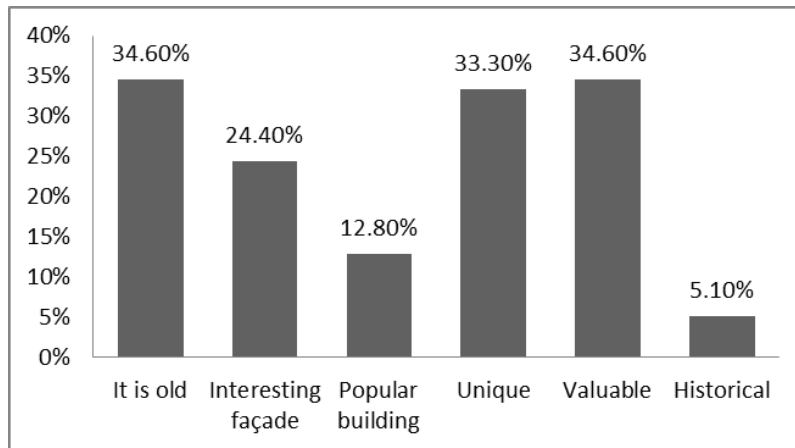


Fig.2. The consideration of the youth on why the chosen building was considered heritage building

4.2. The attitude of the youth concerning heritage buildings

The attitude of the respondents was also examined by giving few statements regarding what should be done on heritage buildings. They were given a choice of choosing more than one agreeable statements. The majority of the respondents (66.7%) agreed to demolish old buildings and build new ones. However, almost half (43.6%) of the interviewees chose to keep heritage buildings. They also recognised that maintaining heritage buildings were considered expensive. While 16.7% of respondents agreed that buildings should relate to the current trend, 3.8% of the respondents preferred to demolish old buildings and build new buildings due to the high cost of maintenance. Regarding the content of a city, the majority of them (85.9%) preferred one with a mixture of old and new buildings. Only a minority (10.3%) preferred a city or town with old buildings only and 3.8% preferred town consisting of new buildings only.

The choice of agreeable statements shows their perceptions and attitudes on heritage buildings. With the majority agreed to keep heritage buildings while demolishing old buildings and build new buildings, some of them also agreed that maintaining heritage building is expensive. The answers showed that they understand and aware partially that keeping heritage building is important, but maintaining is expensive. Though some did agree to demolish old buildings and built new buildings, it is assumed that the respondents were not aware of the importance of keeping heritage buildings but gave importance to new buildings with new trends (Figure 3). The given feedback relates to the theories imposed by Omar and Ali (2009) notes that the youth or young consumers to be brand conscious and more responsive to latest style. The findings also show that majority of the respondents are aware that a city should contain a mixture of old and new buildings. Presumably, by then, one could feel a sense of belonging or feel attached to the city they live.

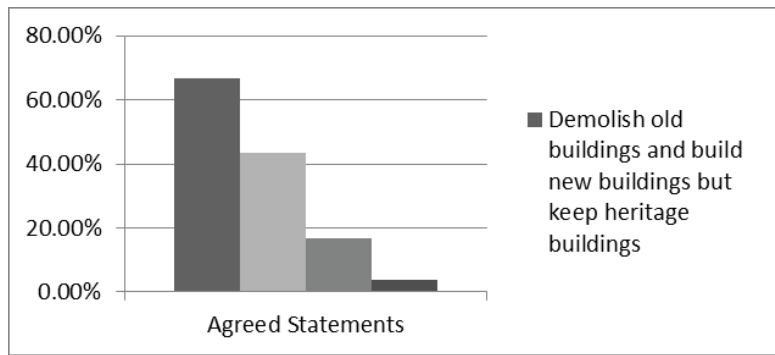


Fig. 3. Statements agreed by the youth regarding heritage buildings

5. Conclusion

Maintaining heritage buildings will be successful only if it caters activities for the younger generations as well because they are the ones who will be living the future. It is in their hands to maintain or not the buildings. If they do not find anything interesting in the heritage buildings now, they will not appreciate nor feel worth saving the buildings. It was found that through this study, the primary purpose of going to the city was to shop and eat. Rather than building new structures from the ground, why not make use of heritage buildings for the same purpose? There are three main methods for maintaining heritage buildings. It can be done either by keeping the original use and original form of the building, by changing the activity in the building but maintaining the original form of the building or by demolishing the whole building and rebuilding with a new form.

The best way of maintaining heritage buildings that this study suggests is by changing the activities in the buildings but maintaining the original forms of the buildings. Despite some efforts are done by the local authorities (MBJB and Iskandar Regional Development Authority), it is arguable that the efforts were considered sufficient by a large portion of the visitors. Thus, for the survival of the heritage buildings in future and at the same time to raise the awareness level of youths on the importance, the buildings will need to be upgraded to cater current users' interests. As targeted by Iskandar Regional Development Authority, by 2025, the city must roll out heritage and cultural initiatives, documenting all heritage and cultural activities as well as to increase the demand for heritage and cultural tourism. While finally to make sure that the heritage area in Johor Bahru City Centre to be gazetted and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Acknowledgements

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